



National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

National Park of
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FEATURE ARTICLE

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National Park Service Celebrates 97 Years of Preservation and Protection

*Everybody needs beauty as well as bread, places to play in and pray in,
where Nature may heal and cheer and give strength to body and soul alike.*

*This natural beauty-hunger is made manifest . . . in our magnificent National Parks—
Nature's sublime wonderlands, the admiration and joy of the world.*

—John Muir

August 25 marks the 97th anniversary since the National Park Service was established in 1916 to preserve and protect special areas set aside for all people to enjoy. The National Park System comprises not only national parks, like the National Park of American Samoa, but also monuments, historic sites, recreation areas, battlefields, lakeshores, and riverways, to name only a few of the over 20 different types of park areas.

Why create national parks? One motive for creating national parks came from the American experience at Niagara Falls at the border between New York State and Canada. The famous falls were America's paramount scenic wonder during the first half of the nineteenth century. However, local landowners had, in their frenzy to maximize profits, gone so far as to erect fences and charge viewers to look through holes at the spectacle. Shoddy concessions and souvenirs and filthy conditions provided an unwelcome experience for visitors to this most sublime of eastern American features. Clearly government control of such a feature to assure its availability to the public was in order.

The first movement to create a park came amidst the Civil War. In 1851, the first Americans had entered the Yosemite Valley in California while chasing a band of Indians. Within five years the

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The National Park Service cares for special places saved by the American people so that all may experience our heritage.

situation at Niagara Falls began to repeat itself. Claims on the valley lands were filed and tolls charged. Haphazard tourism began even as the fame of the valley spread. Concern for this spectacle and its availability to all others looking at profiteering led Congress to withdraw the lands from alienation in 1864 and turn over the valley and a nearby grove of giant sequoias to the state of California as a public park. The state would continue to manage this first federal withdrawal for a park until 1906 when it was merged with Yosemite National Park.

Eight years later Congress established the world's first true national park—Yellowstone in Wyoming, Montana, and Idaho. Instrumental in its creation was the Northern Pacific Railroad, beginning a 50-year period during which railroads became the most profound influence on the establishment of these areas and on the development of tourism in them. Where the Yosemite withdrawal consisted of a pair of relatively small areas, Yellowstone was an enormous land of more than 3,400 square miles. The creation of Yellowstone National Park marked the first serious challenge to the culture of land alienation and consumptive use in American history.

By the end of the century, in addition to Yellowstone, still only five national parks existed—Sequoia, Yosemite, and General Grant in California and Mount Rainier in Washington State. However, Congress was not idle in its preservation efforts and in forming reserves that would later become part of the national park system.

In 1906 the early wave of preservation efforts culminated with the Antiquities Act. The outgrowth of continued outcry for protection of archaeological sites, its primary impact gave the president the power to unilaterally declare national monuments on federal lands in order to protect items of historic or scientific interest. The National Park System today includes more than 70 national monuments derived from this legislation.

By 1912 the parks were well established and reasonably safe from hunting, logging, and mining. Still, in a rapidly changing nation, uses of and threats to the parks evolved, and answers to new questions had to be found. By the turn of the century, automobiles had appeared in several national parks. However, no definitive policy had been established. Department of the Interior officials, conservationists, and others met in Yosemite to discuss auto use in the valley. Their comments indicate the prevalent attitudes of the time—that all forms of access to parks should be encouraged; that the primary concern is for the safety of drivers on the rough and twisting roads; and that no damage either to the park or to the park experience is expected from the admission of automobiles.

In 1916 came the most important legislation. For some years the parks were run as independent units of the Department of Interior. In a concerted campaign by future directors Stephen Mather and Horace Albright, the National Geographic Society, and many others, Congress was encouraged to establish a National Park Service, place all the existing parks under its management, and spell out

the purposes for their preservation. The ensuing act, known as the Organic Act, created the National Park Service and defined its purpose to “conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wildlife therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.”

Today there are over 400 national park areas throughout the United States and its territories. Established in 1988, the National Park of American Samoa preserves and protects coral reefs, tropical rainforests, fruit bats, the Samoan culture, and provides for the enjoyment of these to this and future generations. National park lands and waters are leased from villages and the American Samoa Government through a long-term agreement with the National Park Service.

Adapted from “America’s National Park System: The Critical Documents”